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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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Yes
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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to
the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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25 February 1998

Dear John,

MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE TAOISEACH

Objectives

The key outcome from this meeting should be agreement that the two Governments urgently work up joint proposals, based on "Propositions", for presentation to the talks participants no later than 23 March. Other objectives include:

- thanking the Taoiseach for his support over Sinn Féin's exclusion (though it would be desirable to pre-empt any pressure from the Taoiseach by announcing in advance a date for a meeting with Adams - further advice below);
- discussing how the Governments' joint proposals might best be floated with the parties;
- ensuring that the Irish side have all the necessary preparations in place to deliver their side of referendums on 7 May at the earliest.

The Secretary of State's minute of 24 February sets out our plan for the end-game of the negotiations and a referendum by 7 May.

Joint Proposals

The key to this is getting proposals on to the table for all of the parties to engage on in a couple of weeks of final intense negotiations leading up to Easter. That means tabling them no later than

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23 March - the previous week is no good because everyone will be in Washington for St Patrick's Day and the week before that is the week of Sinn Féin's return.

All the indications are that the Irish Government are thinking of a similar timetable. They have made no secret of the fact that they are working on their own proposals but they clearly envisage a negotiation with HMG so that any proposals come with the endorsement of both Governments.

We have so far declined, on your instructions, to commit ourselves to agreeing joint proposals. Instead, we have canvassed with Irish officials the possibility that the Irish Government might table a draft in its own right with the parties, to which HMG might then respond leading to a synthesis emerging in the negotiations themselves. This would avoid the need for joint proposals, which unionists dislike. But, with Sinn Féin's expulsion, time now looks too tight for that sort of procedure; the Irish side are in any case very unenthusiastic.

Our assessment is that the route to agreement must involve direct negotiations between the two Governments at some stage: the sooner we start, the better chance we have of meeting the May target. But we should register strongly with the Taoiseach the need to take full account of unionist sensitivities. That points to:

- no partisan briefing from the Irish side;
- agreement between the two Governments on when and how the UUP and the SDLP are each to be briefed;
- considering with the Irish side how any joint proposals should be presented to avoid unionist sensitivities eg by presenting them to Senator Mitchell for him to table (to which Mr Trimble seems open). One way of easing this is to say that, as the parties work week by week, we are collating their views into an overall paper.

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Sinn Féin

We owe the Taoiseach a good deal for his support over Sinn Féin, in the face of rising nationalist unease over the issue last week. Since the decision, Ahern has emphasised that he fought to keep the exclusion to the minimum; he will himself be meeting Adams on Wednesday.

A discussion of how best to handle Sinn Féin would be useful. To avoid any impression that the Prime Minister has taken a decision under pressure from the Taoiseach, it would be useful if the likely timescale of a meeting between the Prime Minister and Adams could be made known as soon as possible, certainly before the meeting with the Taoiseach. The choice comes down to:

- next week (beginning 2 March): earlier than the precedent set for the UDP, leading to unionist criticisms. But it would strip away this as an excuse for failing to rejoin the talks on 9 March;
- week beginning 9 March: after the date set for Sinn Féin's re-entry and so consistent with the precedent of the UDP. But likely to be criticised by Sinn Féin as dilatory compared to the Taoiseach and an excuse for not returning to the talks on 9 March, which may cause the Irish Government at least some unease. My Secretary of State favours this option, but with an early announcement.

Conclusion

Some points to make with the Taoiseach are attached.

Given the emphasis on both Governments' determination to press ahead, there is much to be said for a brief joint press statement or doorstep: some possible press points to draw on are also attached.

Yours ever,

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